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AUTHOR Ting-Toomey, Stella
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ABSTRACT

Viewing conflict as a communication process and culture as a system of symbols and meanings allows conflict to be seen as embedded in the normative system of culture. Conflict is functional when it maintains the fundamental norms and values of the culture, regulates an appropriate degree of stability in the system, and takes place in a normative heterogeneous culture where individual opinions and viewpoints are respected. Otherwise, it is dysfunctional. Low Context Cultures (LCC) value individual orientation and overt communication patterns and maintain a heterogeneous normative structure. High Context Cultures (HCC) value group orientation and covert communication patterns and maintain a homogeneous normative structure. Given this framework, several predictions about conflict are possible: (1) LCC individuals are more likely to perceive conflict as instrumental, marked by opposing practices or goals, whereas HCC individuals are more likely to perceive it as expressive, marked by hostile feelings; (2) conflicts are most likely to occur in LCC when individual normative expectations of behavior are violated, in HCC when collective expectations are violated; (3) individuals in LCC are more likely to possess a confrontational, direct attitude toward conflict, while individuals in HCC are more likely to possess a nonconfrontational, indirect attitude; and (4) individuals in LCC are more likely to use factual-inductive style or axiomatic-deductive style in conflict, while individuals in HCC are more likely to use affective-intuitive style. (JL)

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TOWARD A THEORY OF CONFLICT AND CULTURE

Stella Ting-Toomey

Department of Communication
Rutgers University
New Brunswick, N.J. 08903

Tel: (201) 932-7829

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TOWARD A THEORY OF CONFLICT AND CULTURE

Conflict exists as part of the human condition . It is an inescapable phenomenon in all social organizations. From intracultural conflicts to intercultural conflicts, the concept is ubiquitous in all patterned social relationships. Conflict is an elastic and elusive social science construct. As Mack and Snyder (1957) noted twenty-five years ago: "'Conflict' is for the most part a rubber concept, being stretched and molded for the purposes at hand. In its broadest sense it seems to cover everything from war to choices between ice cream cones and sundaes" (p.212).

If the term "conflict" appears ambiguous, the word "culture" is in every sense as problematic. From Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) value-orientations' approach to Pearce and Cronen's (1980) coordinated management of meanings' approach to culture, the study of culture has received divergent treatments. Amidst the different perspectives of either analyzing conflict or culture, relatively little studies have been devoted to a critical examination of the relationships between conflict and culture. There is relatively little information concerning the role of culture in intracultural or intercultural conflict episodes. Conversely, little attempts have been devoted to an in-depth analysis of the role that conflict plays in different cultures.

It is the objective of this study to analyze systematically the functional relationships between conflict and culture, and develop a conceptual framework that accounts for the functional interdependence between conflict and culture. The paper will be developed in three sections. First, the interdependence between conflict and culture will be described and explained. Second, the relationships between conflict and culture will be analyzed within the framework of low and high context cultures (Hall, 1976). Third, the implications of a functional approach to conflict and culture will be examined and discussed.

CONFLICT AND CULTURE: FUNCTIONAL INTERDEPENDENCE

Culture: A Normative System

It is through the communication process that conflicts are publicly acknowledged, defined, and regulated. As Frost and Wilmot (1978) argue: "It is through communicative behaviors that conflicts are recognized, expressed, and experienced" (p.10). For the purpose of this study, conflict is conceptualized as a communication process whereby two or more interdependent parties are involved in intense disagreements for a variety of reasons (for example, orientation incompatibility, communication incompatibility, and/or outcome incompatibility).

Culture is simply defined in this essay as "a system of symbols and meanings" (Schneider, 1976). According to Schneider, culture is concerned with "a body of definitions, premises, statements, postulates, presumptions, propositions, and perceptions about the nature of the universe and man's place" (p.203). While culture provides the basis for a meaningful system of action, cultural norms are oriented toward movements and patterns for actions. Schneider comments:

> Where norms tell the actor how to play the scene, culture tells the the actor how the scene is set and what it all means. Where norms tell the actor how to behave in the presence of ghosts, gods, and human beings, culture tells the actors what ghosts, gods, and human beings are and what they are all about. (p. 203)

Thus, normative behavior and culture are intricately linked. Cultural meanings are expressed through the normative patterns of social actions. Conflict, as a form of social action , is embedded in the normative system of culture.

Within the context of culture, conflict can be viewed as serving two important functions: the generative function and the regnant function. According to Schneider (1976), the generative function of a culture refers to the mechanism

of change in a culture in which "alternations, changes, innovations, and losses from the normative system are the subject of attention" (p.204). The regnant function refers to the integrative force of a culture in piecing "disparate parts of the social system together into a meaningful whole" (p.204). Conflict serves the generative function of a culture because conflict energizes movements through tension creation and tension release, and hence, activates regenerations in the cybernetic system. Conflict serves the regnant function of a culture because it can potentially enforce boundary conditions of an organization, and solidify group identity and power in a particular normative system. A system-theoretical view (Hawes & Smith, 1973; Ruben, 1978) to conflict and communication is closely aligned with this position on conflict and culture.

However, not all conflicts at all times are functional. Precisely, under what conditions does conflict operate functionally in a cultural system? Under what conditions does conflict create dysfunctional outcomes?

Conflict: Functional and Dysfunctional Outcomes

According to Pondy's (1967) model on organizational conflicts, the three criteria of productivity, stability, and adaptability should be addressed whenever the functional or dysfunctional effects of conflicts are discussed. Pondy (1967) comments: "To the extent that conflict is valued negatively, minor conflicts generate pressures towards resolution without alterating the relationship; and major conflicts generate pressures to alter the form of the relationship or to dissolve it altogether" (p. 312). Central to this position is the notion that if conflicts disturb the "equilibrium" of an organization and affect the levels of productivity, stability, and adaptability of a system, conflict is perceived as dysfunctional.

In addition to Pondy's model, Coser (1956, 1967) also developed several

criteria in assessing the social utility of conflicts in an organization. The two most pertinent conditions that lead to an analysis of conflict and culture are: (1) Conflict must not threaten to destroy the basic values that exist in an organization; and (2) the organization must have an established norm of tolerance for diversity and opposing tensions. In brief, if conflicts threaten the basic values of a cultural system and the conflicts happened in a normative homogeneous culture, the potential outcomes can be costly and dysfunctional.

In synthesizing both Pondy's and Coser's criteria on conflict effects in an organization, we can posit that conflicts are functional when: (1) Conflict maintains the fundamental norms and values of the culture; (2) it regulates an appropriate degree of "equilibrium" or stability in the system; and (3) the conflict takes place in a normative heterogeneous culture where individual opinions and viewpoints are respected. Conflicts are dysfunctional when: (1) It threatens the core values of the culture; (2) it severely strains the balance or stability of the system; and (3) the conflict happens in a normative homogeneous culture where tolerance of differences is low. The following section will systematically unfold a conceptual framework of conflicts in low context versus high context cultural systems.

CONFLICTS IN LOW AND HIGH CONTEXT CULTURES

Low versus High Context Cultures

In viewing culture as a system of symbols and meaningful actions, a two-layered definition is implied. The first-layered definition refers to the manifest, expressed dimension of culture through symbolic forms such as verbal and nonverbal communication. The second-layered definition refers to the "meaningful" activities of human behavior which requires commonality of understandings and interpretations. It is the patterned ways of thinking,

acting, and reacting that give rise to the co-creation of common meanings and interpretations. Each culture has its normative ways of acting appropriately or inappropriately in different situations and this normative structure mandates what are prescribed, proscribed, preferred, and prohibited ways of patterned human interactions. Conflict, as a meaningful form of social interaction , is embedded in the larger normative structure of actions. One cannot discuss conflicts without examining the cultural context in which the conflict has occurred.

Understandably however, we cannot analyze conflict behavior in all cultures in the theorizing process . A more fruitful spporach is to actually compare and contrast groups of cultures which theoretically linked together in some meaningful directions. Edward T. Hall's (1976) low and high context communication systems offer an attractive alternative in analyzing conflict and culture on a conceptual level. According to Hall, any transactions can be basically divided into three communication systems:

> Any transaction can be characterized as high-, low-, or middle context. HC [High Context] transactions featured preprogrammed information that is in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal information in the transmitted message. LC [Low Context] transactions are the reverse. Most of the information must be in the transmitted message in order to make up for what is missing in the context... (p. 101)

Although no one culture exists exclusively at one extreme, in general, low context cultures (LCC) refer to groups of cultures which value individual orientation, overt communication patterns ("elaborated codes"), and maintain a heterogeneous normative structure. High context cultures (HCC) refer to groups of cultures which value group orientation, covert communication

patterns ("restricted codes"), and maintain a homogeneous normative structure. For Hall, Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland, and United States are viewed as loaded on the low-context continuum; and the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese cultures are loaded on the high-context continuum. While meanings in the LCC are mainly vested in the explicit communication codes, meanings in the HCC are primarily vested in the "physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1976, p. 91).

Under this conceptual framework, the meanings and implications that are attached to conflicts take on different significance depending whether the conflict has occurred in the low context system or the high context system. In fact, we can discuss conflicts from two foci: LCC conflicts and HCC conflicts. Specifically, what are the underlying characteristics of conflicts in LCC as versus conflicts in HCC?

LCC versus HCC Conflicts

The four conceptual dimensions of why, when, what, and how of conflicts will be addressed in accordance with the LCC and HCC frameworks. According to Olsen (1978), conflicts occur primarily because of either "instrumental" reasons or "expressive" reasons. Instrumental conflict is marked by "opposing practices or goals" and expressive conflict stems from "desires for tension release, from hostile feelings" (p. 308). Given the fact that LCC individuals are more likely to view the world in analytic, linear terms and that meanings and persons are commonly perceived as dichotomous concepts, persons in this low context system will probably "punctuate" the conflict event as mainly instrumental-oriented. The LCC individuals are able to rationalize and separate the conflict issue with the person and hence, will more likely to perceive the conflict episode from an "objective," task-oriented

perspective. On the other hand, the HCC individuals who primarily view the world in synthetic, spiral logic terms would be more likely to "punctuate" the conflict event as expressive-oriented. These individuals would perceive meanings, persons, and the conflict episode from an integrative angle, and hence, would have a much more difficult time in "objectively" seperating the conflict event from the affective dimension. In brief, the "punctuation points" of interpreting the causes of conflicts will differ, depending whether the participants are grounded in the LCC worldview or the HCC worldview. To put the key points succintly:

Proposition 1: Individuals in the LCC are more likely to perceive conflict as instrumental rather than expressive in nature.

Proposition 2: Individuals in the HCC are more likely to perceive conflict as expressive rather than instrumental in nature.

The second dimension of conflicts is concerned with the specific conditions in which conflicts are most likely to occur in the two cultural systems. Jackson's (1975) normative system model may be useful in answering this question. According to Jackson, a normative system is "any system of expectations by others for actor's conduct" (p. 244). The coordination of human activities rhyme when "the covert, symbolic responses of others to actor's conduct coincide i.e. the expectations are 'shared'" (p. 243). Conversely, misunderstandings and misinterpretations occur when normative expectations of the situation are being violated by either of the involved parties. The players in the play are "out of sync" with each other because they have not played by the "rule of the game." Hence, in the situation of LCC (because of of its normative heterogeneous system)conflicts are most likely to occur when individual normative expectations of acceptable behaviors are being violated. In the case of HCC, conflicts are most likely

to occur when collective normative expectations of acceptable behaviors are being violated. In the LCC system, a high degree of uncertainty prevails in each interaction situation because the players in the intracultural encounter usually play by individual rules and improvise coordination on the spot. Whereas in the HCC system, a relatively low degree of interaction uncertainty is present (Gudykunst, in press) because each encounter between the interaction partners is primarily a confirmation and a modification of routinized rituals and behaviors. The probability of making an "interaction error" is higher in the LCC system than in the HCC system because there are no clear collective normative rules to guide and govern different moves in the LCC intracultural system. However, it is clearly more noticeable when a stranger from another culture violates the HCC normative interaction routines because the HCC communication system itself is highly structured and homogeneous; and hence, any deviations from the collective normative behaviors would be spotted. To summarize, the two key points are:

> Proposition 3: Conflicts are more likely to occur in LCC when individual normative expectations concerning the interaction episode are violated.
>
> Proposition 4: Conflicts are more likely to occur in the HCC when collective normative expectations concerning the interaction episode are violated.

The third question concerning the relationship between conflict and culture asks: What kinds of attitude do the conflict partners hold toward conflict in the LCC and the HCC? If an individual's interpretive scheme is grounded in a particular culture, and attitude is embedded in this interpretive process, then culture also frames one's attitude. Individuals who are situated in different cultural systems would learn to react differently to conflict. The predominant mode of conflict attitude in the LCC would

probably be one of direct confrontation and leveling process since participants in the LCC believe in the power of explicit codes and the authority of immediate actions. This "doing orientation" approach is mainly motivated by the need to reduce and resolve uncertainties as decisively as possible. The linear problem-solution mode of thinking causes the conflict parties in the LCC to press for resolution and early closure. Whereas in the HCC, the predominant mode of conflict attitude can best be described as evasive and nonconfrontational. Participants in the HCC believe in the use of implicit or restricted codes. A calculated degree of vagueness and circumlocution are employed when tensions and anxieties mount. The HCC individuals may experience tremendous inner tensions intrapersonally, but they would not express and act upon such emotions publicly. These individuals will probably engage in indirect conflict strategies to manage or resolve the issue. More succintly, the general conflict attitudes of the conflict participants in the LCC and the HCC are:

Proposition 5: Individuals in the LCC are more likely to possess a confrontational, direct attitude toward conflicts.

Proposition 6: Individuals in the HCC are more likely to possess a non-confrontational, indirect attitude toward conflicts.

The final question on conflict and culture asks: How do the players actually "play" in LCC conflict as versus HCC conflict? Communication style and attitude are interdependently linked. Style is the overt manifestation of one's cognitive belief. It is a decision-making choice of prescribed or preferred mode of actions within the particular cultural interaction system. Given the basic premises of LCC and HCC, it seems logical that the LCC individuals will probably use the factual-inductive or axiomatic-deductive persuasive strategies (Glenn, Witmeyer, & Stevenson, 1977) to gain

compliance and manage conflict in the tension-generating situation; while the HCC individuals will be more likely to use affective-intuitive style to "smooth over" or indirectly handle the conflict situation. According to Glenn et al. (1977), the factual-inductive style is based on the study of pertinent facts and moves inductively toward conclusions. The axiomatic-deductive style proceeds from the general to the particular, from fundamental principles to their implications. Finally, the affective-intuitive style is based on affective, emotional messages to persuade the audience. Hence, in relating these three persuasive styles with LCC and HCC systems, it seems that the LCC individuals are more likely to engage in either factual-inductive or axiomatic-deductive arguments because of their causal, linear pattern of thinking as reflected through their communication actions; while the HCC individuals are more likely to engage in the affective-intiutive style because their cultural orientations are grounded in values such as harmony in human relationships and adaptability to the surrounding environment. The nonverbal cues in the HCC conflict situation are probably much more important than the verbal signals in the high context cultural system.

In fact, according to Glenn et al.'s (1977) study on these three persuasive styles, results supported the fact that the weight of each of these three styles differs from culture to culture. The persuasive styles of the U.S. and the Soviet Union representatives are that of factual-inductive arguments or axiomatic-deductive logics respectively, while representatives from the Arab countries primarily engage in the affective-intuitive style of emotional arguments and "soft" bargaining strategies. Hence, while individuals in LCC conflict situation tend to use the "hard" bargaining mode of conflict

management; individuals in HCC conflict situation tend to operate on "soft tactics" conflict behavior. In short, the two key principles are:

Proposition 7: Individuals in the LCC are more likely to use factual-inductive style or axiomatic-deductive style in conflict.

Proposition 8: Individuals in the HCC are more likely to use affective-intuitive style in conflict.

Table 1 presents a summary characteristics of the why, when, what, and how questions of conflicts in the low context cultural system as versus conflicts in the high context cultural system.

From the conceptual arguments presented previously, it can also be predicted that: First, when representatives from the LCC and the HCC encounter one another, conflict potentials are greater in this "mixed condition" because of the different cultural values and norms they operate on. Second, conflict will be much more intense in this mixed condition because of increasing chances of misinterpretations and misunderstandings, opposing "punctuation points" of conflict, and different expectations, attitudes, and communicative styles toward conflict.

IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS

An attempt has been made to explore systematically the relationships between conflict and culture from a functional angle. The functional interdependence between conflict and culture has been addressed. The conditions whereby conflict is most likely to occur have been discussed, and the functional and dysfunctional outcomes of conflict have also been analyzed. Finally, the basic characteristics that distinguish conflicts in the LCC setting and conflicts in the HCC setting are probed.

Specifically, three major implications can be deduced from this

functional perspective to conflict and culture. The first implication of this theoretical framework establishes the conceptual grounding that conflict and culture are two inseparable concepts. One has to probe into the deep structure of respective cultural systems if one wants to gain an in-depth understanding of the intricate human conflict process. Culture dictates how conflict can be interpreted, punctuated, and managed. As Bateson notes, "all communication necessitates context, and that without context there is no meaning" (1978, p. 13). Culture provides the context in which human conflicts occur.

The second implication of this study is in its delineation of the specific conditions that generate functional and dysfunctional conflict outcomes. Conflict is functional in its cultural system when it maintains and regulates the equilibrium or stability of the larger system. It is dysfunctional to its system when it strains the levels of productivity, stability, and adaptability of individuals involved in the system. A cultural system which maintains a heterogeneous, normative structure enables the individuals in that system to handle conflict openly, and with a wider range of creative communicative repertoires. To the degree that a cultural system maintains a homegeneous normative structure, individuals are relatively "underequipped" to confront conflicts openly and confrontatively because of their basic conflict attitude and style.

The third implication of a functional approach to conflict and culture is that a set of testable propositions concerning the relationships between conflict and culture have been generated. By casting conflict amidst the two LCC and HCC cultural systems, systematic testing of the propositions on conflict and culture is made possible.

Future directions of theoretical development and research on conflict

and culture can focus on the testing and the refinements of the propositions that are advanced in this study. Interpretive and ethnographic approaches may be used to elicit the perceptions and interpretations of actors situated at the two different cultural systems. The two questions on conflict attitude and style in the LCC and the HCC can be assessed through the use of questionnaire method and content-analysis approach. Finally, interaction analysis methods such as Markov chain and Lag sequential approaches can be used to track the verbal and nonverbal sequential developments of communication processes in low context conflict as versus high context conflict. A convergence of both interpretive and empirical methods in analyzing conflict and culture will probably yield the most fruitful and productive outcomes in the advancement of our understanding of the interrelationships between conflict and culture.

In summary, the ideas that have been presented in this essay are meant to be a starting point toward a workable, functional framework that accounts for the relationship between two fascinating phenomena: conflict and culture. Cultural difference is assumed to play a major role in the conflict process. Conflict is often intensified and escalated because of different value orientations, cultural expectations, and attitudes toward conflict. While conflict implies disconnectedness between two human beings, it also pleads for renewed human connections within the larger context of social and cultural processes,

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Table 1

A Summary of Basic Characteristics of

LCC Conflict and HCC Conflict

Key Questions	Low Context Conflict	High Context Conflict
Why	Instrumental-oriented	Expressive-oriented
	Dichotomy of conflict and conflict parties	Integration of conflict and conflict parties
	Interpersonal tensions	Intrapersonal tensions
When	Low collective normative expectations	High collective normative expectations
	High individual normative expectations	Low individual normative expectations
—	Violations of individual expectations create conflict potentials	Violations of collective expectations create conflict potentials
What	Direct, confrontative attitude	Indirect, nonconfrontative attitude
	Solution-oriented	Relationship-oriented
	Conflict is usually resolved	Conflict is usually not resolved
How	Explicit communication codes	Implicit communication codes
	Factual-inductive or axiomatic-deductive style	Affective-intuitive style
	Direct, confrontative strategies	Indirect, nonconfrontative strategies